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Who Put the West in Western Civilization?

Where did “Western” Civilization come from? The term does not refer to any simple geographical location and did not exist until relatively recently. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Chesterton was the first to use the expression “Western man” only ninety years ago, in 1907. How the notion came into existence explains a good deal about what the West represents. For many people, the West simply means Western Europe and countries of European origin such as the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. But the non-European parts of the West, particularly America, have added to and altered the original cultural base. Much of what is characteristically American was forged against European influences, long before there was such a thing as opposition to “Eurocentrism.” Yet we also undeniably remain an offshoot of Europe. In addition, Western ways are spreading to other parts of the globe. Paradoxes of this kind make it necessary to inquire more carefully into exactly what we mean by the West.

Whatever else it may mean, Western Civilization is the primary culture here and in Europe. Yet this simple statement has begun to raise all sorts of protests. Many individuals and groups dominant in our society identify Western Civilization with racism, slavery, imperialism, colo-

onialism, sexism, environmental destruction, and other equally repulsive traits. Even more troubling, they do so without much acquaintance with the rich, varied, open, and questing nature of what is best about the West—or a realistic appraisal of the likely alternatives. Most of these attacks depend upon moral or intellectual intuitions that, elsewhere, have little, if any, importance. So anyone who thinks Western institutions to be of value finds himself at an odd, embattled crossroads. He may agree with the quite Western principles used to criticize some Western failing, but senses danger in the way such principles are blindly turned against their very source.

A civilization is not something we simply inherit or ever finally possess. Each generation, individually and collectively, needs to make a continual effort to appropriate it anew because a civilization is not passed along to us at birth. A civilization is an elaborate structure of ideas and institutions, slowly built up over time by the intelligence and effort of countless individuals working alone and together. If we fail to understand and live out that complexity, which tries to answer to the complexity of

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human life itself, we can easily fall back to a less human existence. It has happened often in history.

At present, we need a profound cultural recovery, yet most college students are not introduced to the basic historical knowledge necessary for that recovery to begin. And although modern America continues to embody many principles of the West, it would be a grave mistake to identify our deeply confused country with Western Civilization. America's manifest troubles cause many to question the virtues of Western Civilization even before they learn what it is or to what degree contemporary America reflects it.

At a minimum, any comprehensive account of the West would have to look at ancient Greece and Rome, the contributions of Judaism and Christianity, the Middle Ages (including the Age of Discovery), the Renaissance, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the current anti-Enlightenment mood in its several post-modernist forms. And this does not even begin to weigh the various ethnic and national contributions to the larger civilization. This essay cannot conduct such a survey. But just to list these complementary and conflicting currents should warn us that the West cannot be reduced to a few simple slogans. Only the decline in the serious study of the past has allowed critics to make public claims that this complex history may be reduced to an organized conspiracy of white men engaged in protecting their own interests.

In the anti-Western reading, the Greeks spawned the whole problem. In any balanced view, ancient Greece produced a series of great geniuses in rapid succession unparalleled in human history and later became the tutor of ancient Rome. Christianity and the Jewish tradition from which it arose first spread to a larger world in

Greek. Though Greek language and thought all but evaporated in the West for almost a thousand years—from before the fall of Rome to the early Renaissance—many labored to preserve as much as they could from the ancient Greek heritage. And when the Greek language became known again, people would turn back, century after century, to study Greek political thought, philosophy, art, architecture, and science.

Why? Not because the Greeks were the oldest Dead White European Males.¹ Europe (in the current sense of the term) did not yet exist when Greece flourished. Ancient Greek culture became part of later European culture because a variety of peoples in very different social circumstances simply found Greek achievements great. So did the high medieval Arabic civilization, which produced some interesting commentaries on Greek philosophy, even before the West. Greece, as we shall see, did not think of itself as European, and by the time Europe arose, Greece lay on its margins. There were many reasons why Greek achievements could simply have been lost or left out of Europe.

Ancient Greece straddled Europe and Asia. The father of history, Herodotus, was a Greek born in Halicarnassus, on the Greek-inhabited coast of today's Turkey. Nonetheless, he began the tradition of distinguishing East and West in his *History* by characterizing the Persian invasion as a battle between Greeks and Barbarians. That dichotomy has drawn intense criticism, and not only from people who have never seriously considered the question. In *A Study of History*, the great British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) berates Herodotus for contributing to European haughtiness toward other civilizations. He points out that, in this case, the Easterners were far less barbaric than the so-called Westerners.² Writing in the first half of this century,

Toynbee thought it urgent to deflate what he called “Modern Western assumptions.” But were he writing today, Toynbee might feel the need to correct an equally exaggerated denigration of the West.

Europe’s borders were always uncertain. In the East, it has been difficult to say whether Turkey, Russia, and “Eastern Europe” are really European. In the West, Spain, as European a country as any, spent over 700 years under Islamic domination, a period as long as the time that separates us from the Magna Carta. And England and Ireland have been regarded—and sometimes regard themselves even now—as best thought of as not really part of continental Europe. Yet despite all uncertainty about its physical borders, “Europe” has an unmistakable cultural as well as a geographical meaning.

Aristotle once wisely remarked that we should not expect greater precision in defining a subject than the subject itself allows. And in the *Politics*, he observes of East and West:

Those who live in a cold climate and in Europe are full of spirit, but wanting in intelligence and skill; and therefore they keep their freedom, but have no political organization, and are incapable of ruling over others. Whereas the natives of Asia are intelligent and inventive, but they are wanting in spirit, and therefore they are always in a state of subjection and slavery. But the Hellenic race, which is situated between them, is likewise intermediate in character, being high-spirited and also intelligent.³

Today, of course, we do not put much confidence in *géographie moralisé*. But, for all the objections that can be raised against Herodotus or Aristotle, their intuitions proved historically right. The Greek ideal of liberty differed from that of surrounding peoples. For the Greeks, the virtue of self-control makes us fit to rule and to obey the rule of law; order in the soul answers to

order in the world. This idea has flourished in the West as it has nowhere else. Indeed, it was only as the inhabitants of the “cold climate” of Europe centuries later made that idea their own that the West was set on its characteristic course.

Today, the most common attacks on Greece come from familiar quarters. Feminists claim that the low status of Greek women overshadows other achievements. Black writers make similar arguments about Greek slavery. And leftists of various stripes argue that Plato and Aristotle represent the ideology of a privileged class rather than the first steps toward discovering universal human nature and ethics. A grain of truth lurks in each of these charges, but, as with many criticisms laid against the West, the failure to see other truths and give them the correct relative weight renders such contentions largely null.

For the great Greeks were not uniquely evil in these matters. All ancient societies showed differences in the status of men and women and great economic disparities among classes. Slavery existed in almost all premodern societies: in pre-Columbian Mexico and Peru, among native peoples in the Caribbean and North America, and in Asia and Africa down to this day. A less ideologized approach would be more curious about how Greece opened up the path toward a political freedom correlated with human excellences. There are complicated historical reasons why we now think women are equal to men, slavery is an abomination, and opportunity should be available to all. But Greek thought about liberty, extended later to all human beings, is a crucial part of the story. That needs to be understood and defended from unconsidered attack—along with other Greek achievements in science and philosophy, poetry, drama, architecture, and art—because they begin a new chapter in human history.

The heart of the accusations against ancient Greece, when they are not merely ideological slurs, lies in Aristotle's belief that some were "slaves by nature." The first book of the *Politics* makes this case that those who do not or cannot control themselves are destined to be controlled by others. This is a serious argument in any age that should not simply be dismissed because of our qualms about the word slavery. The American founders and some of the greatest thinkers throughout history warned of the inevitability of tyranny if popular virtue dries up. This argument has resurfaced at various points, not least during debates over the status of native Americans and blacks in the New World. But we will be misreading Aristotle and blinding ourselves to the liberation that studying other ages may bring, if all we get from "slaves by nature" is a reflection of our own preoccupations with sex, race, and class.

Aristotle claims *some* of us are slaves by nature; but in a sense we are *all* slaves by nature—slaves to our ignorance, passions, and untutored capacities. Elsewhere in Aristotle we see the need constantly to pursue education and self-discipline to overcome our natural slavery. And it is no accident that as our attachment to that view of civilization weakened, our view of education shifted. An errant pedagogy has arisen that makes the ignorant passions of the student the measure of what should and should not be learned. As a result, even when people spend long years under instruction they usually wind up in a kind of learned barbarism.

In a curious development, some Afrocentrists have claimed that Greek philosophy was stolen from the Egyptians—which is to say "Africa." Whether the idea of slaves by nature is part of the African wisdom they do not say. Yet the very Greek thought denounced as embodying Western racism, sexism, and classism by one set

of scholars is being coveted by another for its Africanness. A single ideological standard lies behind this superficial double standard: Greece and the West are bad, while the non-West, especially Africa, is good. Whatever good Greece may have achieved, therefore, originated in Africa. To anyone familiar with the ancient world, though, ancient Egypt was African in much the same sense that modern Egypt, with its Islamic and Mediterranean background, is African; i.e., it's nominally on that continent and not simply black. Even leaving aside the lack of evidence for the African origin of Greek philosophy, this Afrocentrist thesis is built on seriously flawed scholarship.⁴

To be sure, we cannot defend everything even about as great a moment in Western history as ancient Athens. Slavery was a serious evil, and we cannot deny that Greek thinkers looked down on manual labor. Combined with some later currents in the Christian religion, this would excessively depress the status of workers and economic actors for centuries. But it was also through the religious tradition that this shortcoming was remedied. Christianity grew from humble beginnings: fishermen, tentmakers, artisans, slaves. That would have long-term effects. When Saint Benedict set up his monasteries after the fall of Rome in the sixth century, one of his rules for the monks was *laborare est orare*, "to work is to pray." In the Middle Ages, guilds and other corporations put themselves under religious patronage. At the time of the Reformation, it became increasingly common for laymen under Lutheran and Calvinist influences to think of their secular occupations as part of their religious vocations. The ancient philosophers, trying to elevate the human spirit, were right to put work and commerce on a lower plane than the highest things. But the fact remains that the economic dimension of liberty was underemphasized in ancient Greece.

It has been necessary to linger over the charges leveled against this major stage in Western history because, today, if we don't know how to get outside current intellectual obsessions, we will not be able to study the tradition with profit at all. There may be benefits in considering alleged sexism, racism, and class interests in the West. But if we look to unparalleled cultures such as ancient Greece for enlightenment only to find reflected there the concerns of contemporary campuses and the media, we will learn only what we already think we know. We do not need Greece, or the Renaissance, or the Enlightenment if we want merely to engage in self-adulation for our supposed superiority to the past rather than receive with gratitude the gifts the past offers.

History enables us to make intelligent comparisons. We may thus find, say, male/female income disparities among us. But, before we indulge ourselves in outrage against the very sources of our liberties, we should compare them with African female genital mutilation, Chinese foot-binding, Indian widows and suttee, the general repression of women in Islam, and a host of other practices that were never tolerated in the West. Let us turn, then, to examining more fully the emergence of the West and its significance for us.

Aristotle thought the peoples living in "Europe" were free, but only in a wandering barbarism lacking political order. Something between his time and ours created a unified Europe. To a Greek, strange as it may seem to us, an identifiable Europe need never have been at all. Europe, as may be observed on ancient maps, is merely a peninsula of the large Asian landmass. Greece under Alexander the Great amassed an empire that extended all the way to India; in Europe, it founded small colonies and traded. Only later did Europe gain a unity of both a general political nature and a

spiritual, cultural, and moral cast. The two institutions most responsible for the emergence of that Europe were the Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roman Empire presents an even more mixed picture than does ancient Greece, a reminder that, historically, quite unworthy vessels are often the bearers of great human goods. Gladiator and animal fights in the Coliseum, the brutal persecutions of early Christians, the crude crucifixions of criminals, and the vast slave populations all confirm that, paradoxically, something quite uncivilized in Rome co-existed alongside civilizing tendencies. Without Rome, for example, the Greek influence on the West might have remained as distant as Persia's. The Rome of the Caesars was a conduit for Hellenistic civilization, and Rome itself would become the standard of civilization in Europe for over a thousand years.

The Romans were a practical people; their philosophers, poets, and artists, with notable exceptions, were inferior to the Greeks. As a result, Roman culture was largely a borrowed affair. The characteristic Roman professions were soldier, engineer, and governor. The Romans energetically took control of the lands around what they came to call *mare nostrum*, i.e., "our sea," the Mediterranean. Under the genius of Julius Caesar, Rome conquered Gaul, parts of Germany, Britain, Asia Minor, and beyond.

The greatest Roman poet, Vergil, gives a picture in his *Aeneid*, not of Rome as it really existed, but of an ideal Rome, founded by an Aeneas who undertook the journey from Troy to Italy. During a visit to the underworld, Aeneas hears from his dead father a humble and realistic description of Rome's missions:

Others will cast more tenderly in bronze
Their breathing figures, I can well believe,
And bring more lifelike portraits out of marble;

Argue more eloquently, use the pointer
To trace the paths of heaven accurately
And accurately foretell the rising stars.
Roman, remember by your strength to rule
Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:
To pacify, impose the rule of law,
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.
(*Aeneid* VI, 848-57; Fitzgerald trans.)

The word translated as “strength” here is *imperium*, Empire. Earlier, Vergil’s Jupiter promises the Romans something later writers saw as similar to what Jahweh promised the Israelites, “For these I set no limits, world or time/ but make the gift of empire without end.” Almost as much a religious as a practical vision, and that is why in the *Divine Comedy* Dante, the greatest Christian poet, looking back at Roman history, chose Vergil as his guide in the next world, all but the parts that enter specifically Christian territory.

Furthermore, the line “To pacify, impose the rule of law,” might be better translated as “to add the habit of peace to peace itself.” In the centuries to follow, the rule of law, the law of nations, and natural law, all notions that got a strong boost in Rome, would become mainstays of Western thought about matters within and among states. These are issues too complicated to go into at any length here. But listen to Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Emperor of the second century, who expresses his gratitude to one of his brothers for teaching him to value “the conception of the state with one law for all, based upon individual equality and freedom of speech, and of a sovereignty which prizes above all things the liberty of the subject.”⁵ Marcus Aurelius would have been a great figure in any age. Still, it is not merely chance that almost two millennia later, this is still the common moral language—Roman language—among Western nations.

In the making of the West, the ideal Roman type worked slowly behind the quite

unideal day-to-day reality. We find a Roman impulse toward justice and the unifying of various peoples that helps us understand why the American founders thought a good deal about Rome, particularly because of the history of squabbling between individual city states in the ancient and medieval worlds, and tendered us the Latin motto, *E pluribus unum*. We find that Rome’s penetration into much of the known world through roads, bridges, effective administration, and the Latin language would not be surpassed in Europe until the seventeenth century. That physical and political drawing together, that unique mixture of the practical and the ideal, prepared the ground for the spiritual and cultural unification of Europe.

This brings us to the question of the third great early formative influence on Europe: Christianity and the Jewish background from which it arose. It has long been a blind spot in historiography, at least since the Enlightenment and, in ways, going back to the Renaissance, to think that the Middle Ages were merely a dark interlude between the ancients and their rediscovery. In this reading, crusades, inquisitions, forced conversions, and superstition form the trajectory of Western religion. This is both wrong and crippling in any attempt to understand the rise of the West.

By the time the Roman Empire in the West was overrun by the barbarians, part of Europe had been brought together within Roman culture. But North Africa and large parts of the East had been brought within the same culture, and they would not have a history similar to Europe’s. The division that occurred, one that persists to this day, was between the Latin West and the Greek East. Europe underwent a series of changes that enabled it to emerge from the period of loss of learning and centuries of barbarian invasions as something that

we would identify even today as Western Europe. But in the High Middle Ages, people thought of themselves not in a geographical sense but rather in cultural terms as part of “Christendom.” If we overlook Latin Christianity, out of either a prejudice against religion or a misplaced fear that telling the truth offends against pluralism, we will have no way of understanding the emergence of Europe and the West.

There was a missionary fervor in Christianity that made it by nature expansive. Christians created an international network of church authorities quite separate from their civil counterparts. Despite all the disagreements, apostasies, and turmoil within the churches, this authority and the slow missionary work of monks, sometimes helped sometimes hindered by secular rulers, drew the European peoples into a real unity.

The parallel authorities seemed to reflect Christ’s instructions to the apostles to “Render unto Caesar’s the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” That basic idea has had a varied career in the past 2000 years. We are used to thinking the separation of Church and state a modern idea, but its roots run deep in the West. Edward Gibbon remarked in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that, “the various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher equally false; and by the magistrate equally useful.”⁶ As Christianity spread, that would no longer be the case. The emperors often tried to use Christianity and sometimes succeeded, but sometimes new had appeared.

Two main ways of relating God and Caesar emerged in the Empire. In the Roman East, God and Caesar became closely identified, especially around the new capital, Constantinople. Bishops might be appointed and church councils called by the

Emperor. Here lie the roots of what is sometimes called Caesaropapism; and while that Eastern Christianity had and continues to have great contributions to make to culture, it followed closely the ancient idea of the City and its gods as inextricably bound up together. One reason the countries of Greek Christianity—Greece, the non-Latin Slavic nations, preeminently Russia—are ambiguously “European” is a different understanding of the relationship of the spiritual and the temporal that began in the late Empire.

In the Western part of the Roman Empire, something else happened. Bishops and other church officials became parallel sources of authority to political authorities. They were not necessarily opposed to the new Christian Empire. Indeed, sometimes in figures such as Saint Ambrose, the great bishop of Milan, training in the old imperial bureaucracy was combined with vigorous pursuit of the new Christian dispensation. His pupil, Saint Augustine, one of the greatest geniuses who ever lived, explains brilliantly how, though the two are inextricably bound to one another in this world, the City of God differs from the City of Man. Rebutting charges that the Christian religion had softened the old pagan virtues, thus enabling the barbarians to overrun Rome, Augustine instead claims that Christ actually empowers people able to act virtuously as mere pagan philosophy could not. Furthermore, Augustine believed, Christian humility purified the very virtues of paganism, which, though real virtues had been placed at the service of Rome’s *libido dominandi*, a lust to dominate.

There is good historical evidence to believe Augustine was right. The church was carrying out a practical task, running health and support groups, slowly winning people over to differently oriented lives all over the West. For example, acting on the Mosaic

law, it succeeded in eliminating the widespread ancient acceptance of male homosexuality. Plato and Aristotle, and some of the later Roman Stoics, had already arrived at the view that it would be best for any society if sex only occurred between a man and woman in marriage. But given the morals of the ancient peoples, such views might have never gone further than sophisticated philosophical circles. It took the Christian church to shift social mores both among the elites and throughout the general population.⁷ Along with homosexuality, the ancient practices of suicide, infanticide, and slavery slowly diminished in the West.

During what we used to call the Dark Ages, not only do we see the origins of Church/state separation and a new morality; we also begin to see representative institutions that balance various interests in society. Medieval kings and lords answered to lesser nobles and the people in ways that later kings, when a new concept of divine right was emphasized more than it had been in the medieval view, would not. In any event, we need a renewed appreciation of medieval political and spiritual contributions to the modern world to understand ourselves and the world in which we live. Because by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it is possible to detect the geographical, spiritual, moral, and political outlines of modern Europe.

The later Middle Ages also began the recovery of ancient wisdom through Latin translations from earlier Arabic translations of Greek thinkers whose works were lost after the fall of the Western Empire. During the Italian Renaissance, the Western Europeans were reading philosophers and the New Testament in Greek again with enormous consequences for European science, art, literature, and religion. That they could think of themselves as one people recovering their classical and Christian heri-

tage was due to the medieval synthesis they and many since have ignorantly spurned.

The ancient division of the world into Europe, Asia, and Africa began to take on concrete importance during the Renaissance for several key reasons.⁸ First, the need to find other routes to the spices of the East drove the Portuguese down the West African coast and around the Cape of Good Hope to India, thus giving Europeans a palpable feel for these ancient regions they had earlier only grasped in the vaguest way. Second, the discovery of the Americas and their conquest by European powers both strengthened Europe's global power and sharpened its sense of its own identity as different from these new peoples. Finally, the division of the West into Catholic and Protestant during the Reformation weakened the idea of a unified Christendom, though European peoples clearly felt themselves as part of one culture. Thus, Christendom was becoming Europe at the same moment that Europe, by its overseas adventures and other developments, was turning into a global presence that ultimately would be better described by the less restricted term "the West."

Let us turn briefly now to Europe's world expansion for the light it sheds on some of the controversies that have arisen over the modern history of the West. Around 1500, Europe discovered the Americas and began opening up the first truly global interchange among the various parts of the world. Critics dispute this way of putting it: peoples in the Americas and other parts of the world, they say, already knew where they were and had no need to be "discovered." But this is false. None of the civilizations in the Americas, not even the relatively high cultures of the Aztecs and Incas, had the slightest notion of the rest of the world or their place in it. The same was the case for the ancient civilizations of Asia. It may be true that,

during exploration, Europe introduced assumptions (and spread colonialism) to the great annoyance of latter-day anti-Eurocentrists. But this is only to say that Europe was the first to attempt a kind of global understanding where previously there had been none at all. All current attempts to give a different reading of the past 500 years of history, like it or not, must begin with the European achievement of global scope.⁹

This is particularly upsetting to many theorists. Edward W. Said, for example, has argued that since 1500 “Eurocentric culture relentlessly codified and observed everything about the non-European or peripheral world, and so thoroughly and in so detailed a manner as to leave few items untouched, few cultures unstudied, few people and spots of land unclaimed.”¹⁰ The odd thing about this statement is that Said thinks this European curiosity about non-Europeans is somehow sinister. A Palestinian culture critic and classical pianist who has been welcomed by a wide Western audience while teaching at a prestigious university in the United States, where he uses the very tools of Western historical scholarship to appeal to the Western inclination toward egalitarianism, is in an odd position to denounce alleged Eurocentrism.

Europe’s interest in other cultures is unparalleled in human history for many reasons. European culture is a multicultural amalgam of the two ancient classical civilizations and the Eastern culture of the Bible, which was wholly non-European. In addition, as we still see today, the national cultures of Europe complicate the picture further. Instead of regarding Europe as an evil monolith, the champions of multiculturalism might do well to recognize that their very interest in diverse cultures stems directly from multicultural Europe. In many instances, the interest accompanied missionary work. The Franciscan Bernar-

dino de Sahagún, for example, wrote the history of the Aztecs in Nahuatl, the Aztecs’ own language. The Aztecs themselves had not written it since they had neither true writing nor a critical sense of history; the Jesuits among the Canadian Indians learned about native languages, cultures, and religions in order to better evangelize. Of course, there were less savory European interactions with cultures, but why would we expect anything else of thousands of people operating in different cultures and continents beyond the reach of the law over hundreds of years?

There is a reason such disciplines as anthropology, ethnology, and archaeology are European creations. Even when they introduced prejudices or false judgments against other cultures, the early Europeans did so unintentionally and against their own scientific principles. It is common these days to claim that, even if the Europeans began such a process of worldwide understanding, Europe and its culture are no better—indeed usually they are characterized as a great deal worse—than the cultures of the indigenous peoples with whom they came into contact. This wrong-headed assertion stems from a conflation of the two meanings of the term *culture*. The first meaning connotes the neutral description of a society attempted by anthropologists or sociologists, an approach developed by the West—a perfectly legitimate and valuable study, if we avoid the error of believing that our neutrality toward cultures for scientific purposes means we cannot judge them in more broadly human terms.

The second meaning of culture signifies the cultivation of each object or human activity to the highest perfection. Music, painting, manufacturing, child rearing, cooking all have internal standards that enable people in every culture to distinguish better from worse. We may not like a particular culture’s cuisine, just as we may

not have an ear for jazz. But people engaged in that form of cooking or music will have quite definite ideas of better and worse within that field. Once cultural practice discovers excellence, we may disagree about new developments, but we never decide that, after all, Salieri was greater than Mozart. All peoples sense that certain elements of their culture are more vital, richer, deeper, and more expressive than others. Cultural hierarchies do indeed exist within cultures, and to deny that is to blind ourselves to a proper appreciation of what others think about themselves.

It is more controversial to apply this principle across cultures, but we may do so circumspectly. Cultures are complex wholes and can only with difficulty be compared, but a society identical to pre-Civil War America that did not include slavery would have been superior to the one that existed. We can make similar judgments across cultures, but often do not today because they may lead to politically incorrect conclusions that some non-Western societies are not preferable to the West. For instance, we have all heard of Aztec sacrifice of captives by cutting out their still beating hearts at the summit of their impressive pyramids. Witnessing these atrocities drove some of the quite callous early Spanish *conquistadores* to sheer outrage. But the sacrifices were not a mere barbarism; the cosmology of ancient meso-America, Mayan, and Aztec, saw the world as having been created by the blood of the gods. Human sacrifice was necessary to keep the world in balance; the blood of humans reinvigorated the cyclical processes of nature. This might also alert us to the complexities that may be concealed under apparently good environmental attitudes when someone tells us that another culture believed in “balance with nature.”

Now what are we to say of this? Shall we say, as some do, “it worked for them,” or,

“we cannot judge among cultures”? No one says that about American slavery or European colonization. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, no friend of Christianity or the Conquest, wrote:

One can only imagine the astonishment of the hundreds and thousands of Indians who asked for baptism as they came to realize that they were being asked to adore a god who sacrificed himself for men instead of asking men to sacrifice themselves to gods, as the Aztec religion demanded.

This is the way a Westerner should reason about better and worse cultural manifestations. Of course, we can always do what the multiculturalists do today and evade these sorts of judgments by pointing to some Western atrocity or refusing to criticize any non-Western culture at all. But this is to abdicate what, even in the eyes of most critics, is the core of human life: moral judgments about good and bad behavior.

Where do we get the principles for such judgments? Obviously, we have a very complex inheritance that involves Greece, Rome, and our Biblical roots along with more recent developments. Today we often apply principles of international law developed during the Age of Discovery. And despite the old European inclination to romanticize or demonize the noble savage, who, looked at closely, is sometimes a complex, fallen creature like the rest of us, some Europeans also tried to think clearly about this new situation. For instance, it is widely accepted that Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican friar, laid the foundation for international law in his reflections on the ethical questions raised by the European encounter with Indians.¹¹ Vitoria’s revulsion at Pizarro’s conduct in the conquest of Peru first stimulated his thinking about Spanish conquests in the New World, but he was soon carried by the very force of his thought to examine a whole gamut of issues relating to the widely differing and previ-

ously unknown peoples.

Basing his arguments on the best legal and moral authorities in the scholastic tradition, particularly St. Thomas Aquinas, Vitoria put forth some principles:

- Every Indian is a man and thus capable of attaining salvation or damnation.
- The Indians may not be deprived of their goods or power on account of their social backwardness, nor on account of their cultural inferiority or political disorganization.
- Every man has the right to truth, to education, and to all that forms part of his cultural and spiritual development and advancement.
- By natural law, every man has the right to his own life and to physical and mental integrity.
- The Indians have the right not to be baptized and not to be forced to convert to Christianity against their will.¹²

These principles may seem of little significance in light of what happened to native territories. But failure to live up to principles does not mean that they are themselves meaningless. Consider these declarations:

- The Indian rulers, whether natural or elected, enjoy the same fundamental rights as a Christian or European prince.
- According to natural law, a non-Christian cacique or king does not lose his dominion or jurisdiction due to his infidelity or idolatrous practices, and even Christian subjects are obligated to obey him.
- The Indian peoples may defend themselves with arms and may rebel against foreigners who unjustly seize their territories or who govern the republic to their own advantage or to the advantage of their own people.
- The Spaniards may justly defend themselves against belligerent Indians so long as they stay within the limits of legitimate defense; but they may not use victory as an excuse for seizing the Indians' towns or for enslaving their inhabitants; a properly defensive war does not justify conquest when the Indians believe, on account of ignorance, that they are justly defending their property.
- However, recourse to war and to said security measures may never serve as a pretext for slaughtering, or sacking or occupying the towns

of the Indians, who are by nature fearful and humble, and who have more than sufficient reason for distrusting the Spanish conquistadors, whose ways are strange to them and who are armed and more powerful than themselves.

Anyone familiar with just-war theory will recognize that Vitoria is here applying its principles of self-defense, just cause, discrimination, proportionality, and last resort to Spaniards and Indians equally.

Vitoria's positions develop the best of the prior Western international-law tradition in the face of a new challenge. As Samuel Johnson, a Tory critic of European arrogance and imperialism, was to say centuries later, "I love the University of Salamanca; for when the Spaniards were in doubt as to the lawfulness of their conquering America, the University of Salamanca gave it as their opinion that it was unlawful."¹³ And this history of ethical reflection on the New World probably influenced John Locke, who had an extensive collection of books and documents about the European discoveries.

When we think of Indians today, our view of them as weak, essentially benign group of peoples badly treated for centuries, colors our historical judgment. But the peoples and cultures of the New World before the spread of European influence differed widely from one another and did not always display characteristics that anyone would wish to defend today. Despite the special-pleading by defenders of Native Americans, cannibalism existed without a doubt among the Aztecs, Guaraní, Iroquois, Caribs, and several other tribes. Pedro Fernandes Sardinha (Sardine), the unfortunately named first bishop of what is now Bahia, Brazil, for example, was eaten by the Caeté, a local tribe. Human sacrifice was practiced by the high cultures and several groups not so developed. Slavery and torture were widespread from the Southern Cone to the Pacific Northwest. Cul-

tural differences between Europeans and native Americans made mutual understanding difficult and made encounters bloody. But if these cultures had been left alone and were still intact today, most of us would think that humanity and reason required intervention, for good Western reasons. It is only ignorance—of history and anthropology—that permits a sentimental view of people who have, without question, been badly treated.

It is against this background that we must view the modern history of the West. It can always be objected that despite this rich heritage and the labors of philosophers, theologians, and statesmen to achieve a humane world, the West has been a miserable failure by its own standards. Anyone who has ever read of the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the conflicts between nation states in the eighteenth century, and the sometime brutal European colonization of the non-Western areas, may believe that the West cannot be taken as a model. Furthermore, the West very nearly destroyed itself in this century with two ferocious world wars and a Cold War that, given the power of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, could have poisoned or destroyed the earth.

All of this raises important questions about principles and practice. One of the things Americans in particular want to avoid is any temptation to think of ourselves as somehow outside history. A wise European pointed out not long ago that only in America would people seek a “more perfect union” since Americans “by their very nature, have never been satisfied with mere perfection.”¹⁴ It deserves to be said that this dissatisfaction is the source of much of what is good about America; we neither settle for things as they are nor, at least until recently, have become cynical about the possibilities of human life. And that is why

as the hegemony of Europe gave way to the American Century—probably sometime around Chesterton’s invocation of Western Man—America became the leading example of the globalized European culture now called the West.

One way we express perfectionism, however, is through a curious kind of ahistorical pragmatism. English-speaking democracies have been prone to think they can get things done without worrying very much about justifying theories. We like to compare ourselves with continental Europe, which got itself into trouble over the past few centuries by following various systematic ideologies. The French Revolutionary tradition, we enjoy pointing out, fell prey to various theoretical fanaticisms that have terrorized the world. Socialism and Communism were variants of that tendency; Nazism with its mad “scientific” racial theories was another. But just because wrong theory has led to hell does not mean that no theory will lead to paradise.

The English-speaking democracies today are themselves falling prey to a pragmatic tyranny precisely because they are drifting farther and farther from their Western roots. We never had, for example, the sharp clash between religion and political liberty that some of the continental nations did; indeed, we used to see the religious and moral traditions of the people as the bulwark of public life. That is no longer the case. The engagement of our courts in the ethnic cleansing of all such traditions from the public square would have seemed inadvisable, and perhaps impossible, to Augustine and Washington alike. Pockets of resistance remain within civil society, but, given the crisis of education, (including religious education), it remains to be seen if these age-old sources of our liberty will last. The vast influence of the media, so-called popular culture, and state education monopolies tie all of us in a knot difficult to

escape. As we try to recover the high Western culture, we have to make immense efforts to restore this popular culture as well. And we cannot do that by appeals to pragmatism; we need to begin speaking in popular language about Western principles which, with proper encouragement, most Americans would practice.

It has become common lately to ridicule the notion that the West is in decline. Optimists or historical skeptics say that people always have the sense that some prior age was better or more secure. They point to undeniable achievements and the most spectacularly successful political and economic arrangements in human history and bid us to be of good cheer. We may be grateful for all these things and count them among the achievements of the West. But the spiritual, moral, and intellectual grounding on which they were built is slipping away from us, despite our material success. To say this is not to accept some inevitable, fated decline. One of the central principles of the West is the belief in free will. Since the ascent or decline of a civilization can only be the sum total of the rise or decline of individual wills and minds, what each of us thinks and does can make all the difference in whether we continue to lose our heritage, or whether we rediscover it and make our materially satisfying world spiritually and intellectually fulfilling as well.

One final characteristic of the West that this essay has not examined, but which is quite evident to people around the world, is our development of science and technology. Why these arose in the West alone is another complex story involving primarily Greek curiosity, Biblical views of an ordered Creation, and the independent institutions needed to pursue research, namely universities, which were the creations of the High Middle Ages. Once those elements were in place, the various revolu-

tions of recent centuries in the subject matter of science were, by comparison, relatively small changes.

The West used to boast of these achievements, as great testimonies to human ingenuity and patience that gave the West the tools needed to dominate the world. More recently, critics have seen both the West's social and material dominance as different expressions of evil: we have lorded it over other peoples, they say, even as we have destroyed nature. Even the Bible, the crucial element of our moral heritage, has been indicted. "Be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the Earth," in *Genesis*, it is said, is the evil root of the West's will to power.¹⁵ Combined with the European sense of superiority, we arrived at a potent formula for the exploitation of nature and other cultures.

Sorting out these claims is difficult because there is a way in which modern science and technology have broken the bounds of our ethical sense. We see in early modern figures such as Francis Bacon the belief that it is acceptable to "put nature on the rack for the relief of the man's estate."¹⁶ Something brutal was released with the new science, yet it does seem absolutely necessary to its practice. On the positive side of the ledger, millions, even billions, of people have been freed from the age-old scourges of famine and disease by that same development. Today, the only reason large groups of people starve is because of politically induced famine. We are capable, in an ecologically sustainable way, of feeding and providing for not only the billions of people now alive but those who will be born in the coming decades to increase the population to almost twice its current size. Turning our back on technology in our circumstances would be both imprudent and inhuman.

Some population alarmists like Paul Ehrlichmann and Garrett Hardin do not

shrink from recommending human die-backs, but that is not an option for most of us. Besides the sheer human suffering it would bring, what kind of world would we create if in addition to killing children in the womb and hastening death among the aged and infirm, we begin callously to allow perfectly healthy people to die out of some abstract notion of what ecological balance requires?

There is within the technological development of the West something far more worrisome than the ecological questions: those problems are already largely being resolved and, with the exception of the controversial questions about greenhouse gases and the ozone layer, there seems no doubt we can cope with the problems we have created.¹⁷

More worrisome, however, is that within the West technological ideology has come to separate us from the deeper bases of our culture. We see in medical ethics, human life issues, and contemporary attitudes toward nature a reductionist view that no longer preserves the fullness of the West. Human beings are regarded as a collection of chemical reactions resulting in certain impulses. Sex, therefore, becomes a mere matter of hormones over which we have no control. Crime is the result of an interplay between genetics and environment. We cannot reject insights into human action that the sciences may bring us. But the old Aristotelian notion of the patient formation of virtue—and the very belief that we are spiritual beings who can rule ourselves and therefore attain a certain dignity—finds few cultural institutions willing to encourage us in this always difficult task. The consequences for relationships between men and women, families, children, and the social order have been devastating. We of course need to fight various battles in politics, law, and the culture, but without that Western notion of human nature, none

of the rest will really matter.

One reaction to the narrow, rationalist view of human beings that has been with us since the Enlightenment is to deny the validity of reason. We cannot here explore the complexities of post-modernism, deconstruction, post-structuralism, and many other movements that are often used to bully us into thinking the Western tradition a guilty conspiracy. In theory, these movements are attempting to open up a falsely closed view of human life. The problem is that they do so, not by conceptualizing a truer one, but by a radical skepticism, a Nietzschean drive toward self-creation that denies all value in the world and locates it only in what we ourselves create. That is to substitute for one inhuman theory another even worse.

We also need to recognize how the inhuman has entered our free economy. Plato once warned that if we forget the knowledge of the good life, shipbuilding will still provide us with ships, shoemaking with shoes, the others arts with their various products, yet without the science of the good life that all things are to be used for, we will find all the other arts have failed us.¹⁸

Western Civilization cannot be found in some textbook or database. It has no website. It is not a course that you take, and then forget, like so many others. Today, many people with advanced degrees do not understand civilization, indeed may barely have heard of it. We are still quite early in our lives as a global species—only 500 years separate us from the first Westerners who set out around the world. Whether a universal civilization will emerge from this situation is impossible to say; whether it is even desirable is almost as difficult to say. We need a long reflection on unity in diversity before we come to that. But the multiculturalism of such a global civilization is likely to be quite different than the one the

multiculturalists envisage, if only because the West has set the terms for much of the debate and continues to attract many to itself from other cultures.

Despite its many shortcomings and occasional atrocities, this Western dominance is providential. No better champion of justice, fairness, liberty, truth, and human flourishing exists than the complex and poorly known entity we call Western Civilization. The West, in the broadest sense of the term, produced both the New Testament and the Marquis de Sade, Francis of Assisi and Hitler. Yet its rise has, in the main, been a blessing to the human race. The West's weakening or demise would pose a threat to many human virtues. Recovering and extending Western principles remain our best hope for a more humane world. For in these matters, there is no serious rival to the West.

Notes

1. For a sophisticated commentary on this notion, see Bernard Knox, *The Oldest Dead White European Males, and Other Reflections on the Classics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).
2. Arnold Toynbee, "'Asia' and 'Europe': Facts and Fantasies," IX. C (I) Annex to *A Study of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), Vol 8., 708-729.
3. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1327b.
4. Facts have not stopped some over-ingenious characters like Martin Bernal in his *Black Athena* from confusing Greece, Egypt, and black Africa. The antidote to this ideology-driven misreading of the ancient world is the kind of cool reasoning to be found in Mary Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa*. Cf. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 1996; see also Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, eds., *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
5. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *The Communings with Himself*, trans. C. R. Haines (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 11 (I. 14).
6. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, (London; Methuen, 1896-1900), Vol. 2, 28.
7. On this point see my "Plato Does Colorado: Were the Ancient Greeks Modern Gays," *Crisis*, March 1995.
8. For the best brief statement of this view, see Peter Burke, "Did Europe Exist Before 1700?," *History of European Ideas*, Vol I, No. 1, (1980), 21-9. Denys Hay's *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), remains one of the best studies of the medieval contributions to the notion of "Europe."
9. On this and related points, see my *1492 and All That: Political Manipulations of History* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992).
10. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 267-8.
11. See James Brown Scott, *The Spanish Origin of International Law* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1928).
12. Luciano Pereña Vicente, ed., *The Rights and Obligations of Indians and Spaniards in the New World* (Salamanca and Washington, 1991).
13. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birbeck Hill, revised by L. F. Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 455.
14. Luigi Barzini, *The Europeans* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 11.
15. The *locus classicus* of this view is Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-1207. Though thirty years old, White's essays continue to provoke debate over Biblical sources of callousness toward nature.
16. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in Vol. 1 of *Francis Bacon*, ed. Arthur Johnston (New York: Schocken, 1965), 44.
17. See the Summer 1996 issue of *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences*, "The Liberation of the Environment," which is entirely devoted to explaining how most of our environmental questions will be shortly solved.
18. Plato, *Charmides*.